

Sandow Birk

SFGATE

Sandow Birk's imaginary monuments at Catharine Clark

By Kimberly Chun

October 20, 2015

Los Angeles artist Sandow Birk makes monuments, in his mind.

SF

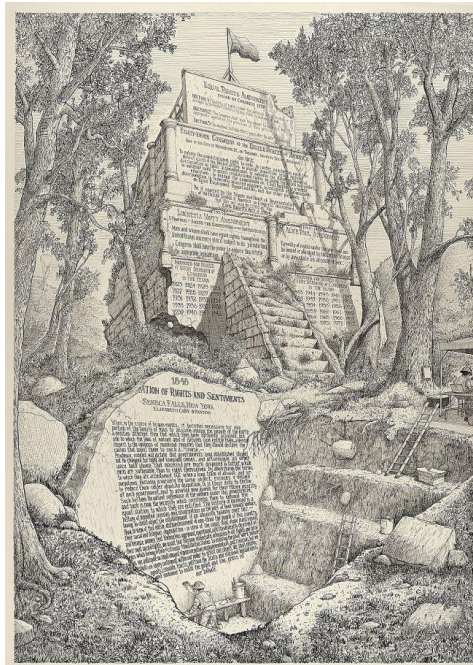
248 Utah Street
SF, CA 94103
+ 415 399 1439

NY

313 W 14th Street 2F
New York, NY
By appointment only

WEB

www.cclarkgallery.com



Excavating the Foundations of the Unfinished Temple of Human Rights, 2015

That's where they'll stay. Take a recent drawing that recognized this year's 100-year anniversary of America's national parks, a work that will find its way into his current show at Catharine Clark Gallery, "Imaginary Monuments."

"I imagined the text of the law carved into the face of a rock in Yosemite, which is the most appalling thing to do, ever," the artist, 52, says from L.A. "It used to be really cool to blow up a mountain and put a face on it, blasting the whole mountain away."

Birk chuckles with disbelief, picturing it happening today, in this era of perpetual flux and disruption.

Such follies remain fantasies in “Imaginary Monuments.” On the page, Birk is free to dream wildly, drawing from current events and incorporating relevant legal texts and historical documents into exquisitely detailed renderings of large-scale architectural monuments. Those surreal edifices are anything but reality-based, being balanced on the sparest supports (*Proposal for a Monument to the NYPD*) or leaning precariously with the weight of expectations (*Proposal for a Monument to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights*).

The project began seven years ago with an invitation to be the artist-in-residency at the Smithsonian. After being handed a “backstage pass to all the museums,” he says, “I spent two months being a tourist and doing all the stuff you do in Washington. I went to the National Archives and saw the Declaration of Independence.

“What struck me was the whole tourist world of D.C. was presented like it was 1776, with people dressed up in tricorn hats and ringing bells. But the people in the buildings are making decisions that are affecting my life right now — it’s not 1776. I had just seen the Constitution, and there are all these people talking about the Constitution.”

Birk started reading the actual document and drew his first imaginary monument — a spoof on the Arc de Triomphe. “I started thinking about these texts you take for granted and never really read,” he says. “I like putting the whole text on the page so you can read the entire Constitution or Declaration of Human Rights. You confront it in a different way when you see the words.”

The text is also central to another project, completed this year: “American Qur’an.” For that nine-year undertaking, the artist translated the Quran into English and illuminated the text. A book gathering Birk’s 427 gouache suras, or chapters, will be published in November, and much like his other artworks, it’s founded in a personal as well as politically conscious place.

“I’ve been a surfer my whole life and have traveled a lot to go surfing, and part of this project has been about the many, many times I’ve gone to Muslim parts of the world and listened to the whole American debate of what Islam is,” he says. “Islam is a global thing.”

Kimberly Chun is a Bay Area freelance writer.